

MFP-019

Interviewee: Thelma Collins

Interviewer: Marna Weston

Date of Interview: September 12, 2008

Unidentified male: Who got the camera? Well, I got a picture of Mayor Perkins, Mayor Collins, and Mayor Brown in a picture that was in the *Clarion Ledger*, I believe, back some time ago. I, unfortunately, left it at home. I was planning to have them autograph it, but now I've got the three of these, and I have Mayor Hudson, too, so I have the complete package. Have you finished?

C: No.

Unidentified male: No.

Unidentified male II: That's three-fourths of a winning ticket right there. [Laughter]

Unidentified male: [inaudible 00:43], that's fine with me. Thank you, Mayor.

Thank you.

[Applause]

C: Well, good evening.

Unidentified male: Oh, there was also a part about [inaudible 01:05]—

Unidentified female: See what happens when you interrupt the program?

Everything just—[Laughter]

Unidentified female II: This happens, stay for a while.

Unidentified male: During the Civil Rights days, there was so much chaos among the SNCC people, all we did was a good job in the end. [Laughter] There was a lot of chaos when we were together. Stokely Carmichael and all those people, you had all of these philosophies and everything hidden

together there, and then we volunteers just went back to work. So don't be discouraged.

C: All right. Again, good evening, everybody.

Audience: Good evening.

C: I am so honored to have been invited, because I know without a doubt that you were the trailblazers. And, as my sister said, we're just riding on your shoulders. I'm Mayor Collins, mayor of the city of Itta Bena. I want you to know—and even though maybe some of you did not see the video at the museum—but as B.B. King was riding on his way to Berclair, so I'm going to steal just a little of that joy this morning. I do want to say to you that I'm so thankful. I'm so thankful that—I'm sort of like Mayor Perkins, I get emotional when I think about how far we have come. I want to share with you to let you know how far we have come in Itta Bena. I grew up there. As a little girl—and I want to share this story with you so you will know why the tears are coming. As a little girl, growing up in that small municipality, one day my sister and I decided that we were going to go across the track. All of you understand, when you go across the track, you're in another world. Well, my sister and I decided that we were going to go across the track and look at the beautiful Christmas decorations. Of course, you know we were poor; didn't have those type of decorations. So we decided, oh, well, we're going to go across the track and look at all the beautiful Christmas decorations on the other side of town. Well, by the time we got over there and kind of toured around and got back across the railroad

track, back to our side of town, the police officer stopped us. He said very harshly, what are you all doing across there? Of course we're just shaking. My sister said, we're just across there looking at the Christmas decorations. He said, don't you ever, don't you ever let me catch you across there again. And when I think of that situation and I say to myself, you know, at that moment, God had already ordained me in my mother's womb that I would be the mayor of that entire city.

[Applause]

C: To go anywhere I wanted to go. Just the thought of it. It just touches my heart, because he didn't know—I didn't know—but only God knew that, my God, one of these days I'm going to elevate you. I'm going to put you in a position that you will either be over the police department. So I thank God for you as trailblazers, because if it had not been for the hardships and the people dying for us to have this opportunity, we would not be here today. We have made much progress in the city of Itta Bena. And, of course, as the first African American and, certainly, the first female, I have had a challenge. When I first decided—and really, I didn't decide, because as I grew up in Itta Bena, I knew that I had to get out of there. It's a very small municipality. My goal, my plan, was to get out of there. I said, as I grew up, I know the only way that I could ever get out of this small place, so depressed, so much poverty, is to get an education. When all of my friends went off to college to Jackson State, Tougaloo, and all the others, and of course, my parents said, well, you know we just don't have the

money. So I stayed in Itta Bena, finished at Mississippi Valley State University and then got a master's degree at Mississippi State University. Well, as I—again, I thought for sure that to get an education was my ticket out of Itta Bena. Well, my plan was to move away, get some relief of the oppression there. But, believe it or not, after getting that education, nothing seemed to happen. I sent applications everywhere, got interviews, but something always kept me there. It was almost like a magnet. So I said, okay, I'm going to work for two years in the Greenwood city system, and so I did. Those two years turned to thirty-four years of staying in Greenwood in the city system. [Laughter] And, of course, I retired, came out of retirement because I could not take it, came up, and went back in and taught two more years, a total of thirty-six years that I taught in the school system. But, during that time, every time I would be on my way back into the city of Itta Bena, that yearning spirit would just take over. I promise you, I had no idea of even trying to become the mayor; had never thought of it, because it was not in the cards. I knew that, as an African American, there was no way that I was going to be the mayor of this city. But every time I would be on my way home, it just got into my spirit. You've got to do something. You've got to do something. So, as time went on, I decided—before I tell you that, this was the third year that the current mayor had been in office. He was getting ready to go into his fourth and final year. All of the sudden, he decided that he was going to move out of the city limits and I said to myself, oh, my God, you have been toying with

me. This must be my time. So I walked down to the place to get my—to City Hall to get my papers and qualify, and I ran that last year, that last term, won, and decided to re-run for election. Of course, I did, won four more years, [19]96-2000. In 2000, I ran, and that was too much for the people of Itta Bena. They decided, no, we don't want her, we're going to get someone of the other color, because they had never had a black person before, and we were making so many changes. Little did I—at that time, I said, I will not challenge, because they said I lost by ten votes. The scripture that kept coming to my mind, all things work together for the good of those who love the Lord, and so I said, no, I will not challenge this, because there is a purpose behind me not going in this time. So I waited those four years, and in 2005, I ran again and won by a landslide. I tell you, when I got back, you're talking about things being in disarray, but God had a reason why I had to stay out of those four years. What we're doing right now, we're getting ready in the process of building a new City Hall. We have a beautiful community center that was erected the first year I was in office. Our finances have improved tremendously. When I first got in, our industrial park was still vacant land. We do have several businesses there on that property. We are making progress; Mississippi Valley State University is there right across the street at our neighbor's, and of course, we are a partnership with them. Of course, we are using many of the resources that they have. Things are looking up for the city of Itta Bena. We are not where we want to be, but we're not where we used

to be. Things are not where they should be, but they're going to be so much better. One of my challenges is getting the total community together, and that's what I'm working on now. Next week, or the week after, I'm going into the other churches, the white—predominantly white churches, and we're going to have a session to bring the total community together. Because once I came in office, we had a white flight. Everybody went their separate ways and we have not been able to bring that community together, but I'm determined, and I know that I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me. Thank you all so much for inviting me.

[Applause]

[End of interview]

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